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The Other Side of Conversion

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Kenneth Stow

The Other Side of Conversion*

What where the possible outcomes of religious conversion in the late 16th century? Set on answering at least one part of that question, Isabelle Poutrin has written *Les convertis du pape*, the story of one branch of the noted Corcos family in Rome, as one by one its members left the religion of their ancestors and sought baptism and later successful assimilation into the Roman Catholic world, accumulating wealth and status along the way. Another branch remained not only faithful to Judaism but produced the most noted leader of the ghetto period, Tranquillo Vita Corcos, whose father, too, was a noted rabbi. The Corcos Poutrin investigates are the former.

The book is a master class in documentary research. How Poutrin discovered just the right volumes in the collections of the Roman *Archivio di Stato* in the series Thirty Capitoline Notaries defies imagination. Nor is this the only archive she used. One has to have personal experience in the endless meters of the Roman historical archive to understand how difficult it is to locate and zero in on »just the right document«; it is akin to finding an ultra-rare species in all the world's oceans combined. I exaggerate not. We are further sobered to realize that such intensive archivally based products are today more than exceptional.

What has Poutrin done with her materials? For one, she has demanded we look at the »other side of conversion«. The norm has been to concentrate on those forced to convert in one way or another. Even in the Corcos family, force played a role, applied, furthermore, by those of its members who had willingly opted out of Judaism. Gemma Luzzati, headed toward escape in Venice, was pursued over the Apennines at her family's behest. She was intercepted at Senigallia, brought back to Rome and placed in the home of a certain Lady Antonia, who was supposed to supervise Gemma's conversion.

In her presentation of where force, or »near to force«, was permissible, Poutrin expands on arguments that have in part been made in the past, for instance, by delving into the views of the influential late 15th-century canonist Felino Sandeo. Previous work has also overinterpreted texts, fully misunderstanding the »novelty through synthesis« achieved by Benedict XIV in his *postremo mense* of 1751; or in viewing the idea of *favor fidei* as Benedict's invention.[1] Poutrin clears up these errors. Essentially, it was the view of the Fourth Toledan Council of 633 that prevailed: Force was illegal before conferring baptism, but afterward the person baptized could be coerced to remain Catholic. Parents, interpreted to included almost any relative, could »offer« (oblate) a minor. The only force that was declared illegal was of a direct kind, true coercion, leaving the candidate with no choice: literally, accept baptism, or die.

It is on the willing converts, nonetheless, that Poutrin concentrates, from the Corcos family of probable Iberian origins. She admits, however, to being puzzled as to motives. The family became exceedingly wealthy, especially the prime, although not the first, convert, Salamone di Salvatore Corcos, who took the baptismal name Ugo Boncompagni, whose conversion in 1581 gained him entry into the nobility.[2] Yet was not perhaps Salamone

* Isabelle Poutrin, Les Convertis du pape. Une famille de banquiers juifs à Rome au XVI^e^ siècle, Paris: Seuil 2023, 336 p., ISBN 978-2-02-153665-2

1 See Marina Caffiero, Forced Baptisms: History of Jews, Christians, and Converts in Papal Rome, trans. by Lydia Cochrane, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2011 (orig. Battesimi Forzati, Rome 2004), and cf. Kenneth Stow, Review of Marina Caffiero, Forced Baptisms, in: Journal of Religion 93,2 (2014), 239–242.

2 Previously on the Boncompagni, see Guendalina Serafinelli, Carving Out Identity: the Boncompagni Family, Alessandro Algardi and the Chapel in the Sacristy of Santa Maria in Vallicella, in: Chiara Franceschini et al. (eds.), Chapels of the Cinquecento and Seicento in the Churches of Rome. Form, Function, Meaning, Rome 2020, 146–165; also by Guendalina Serafinelli, The ›Renegade Rabbi‹ from Morocco: Andrea de Monte and His Chapel in the Roman Church of the Madonna ai Monti. Conversion, Legitimacy, and Christian Propaganda, in: Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome 69 (2024), 354–399.

convinced aforehand of Christianity as true? He would not have been alone; but at least he, unlike other converts, did not attack Jews. For my part, I would suggest his Iberian past was a signal factor. To be sure, the first Corcos conversion, of Elia di Salamone (not to be confused with the Salamone di Salvatore just mentioned) occurred in 1566, that is, over seven decades after the Spanish expulsion of Jews in 1492. Still, the Spanish example remained alive in the numbers of converts that had been made there, but also in the continuing pursuit of so-called New Christians by the Inquisition. Was it possible that somebody in the Corcos family had converted and fled, and that an informant had let it be known? This is stretching the point, but I do not think that seeking a Spanish connection would be out of order. Indeed, encouraging conversion, Rome did not have the »purity of blood« statutes limiting New Christians that bedeviled the latter in Spain. In Rome, the road to conversionary assimilation was not strewn with unmovable boulders. Indeed, as Poutrin puts it – and others have, too – converts like the Corcos were »trophies«.[3] The hope for mass conversion died shortly after Paul IV established the ghetto for this very purpose, but the conversionary program itself continued, to buoy up a heavily challenged Church. Converts were welcomed, not made into objects of suspicion, a practice that can be traced in Rome to the late 15th century.[4]

We must also note that the Corcos were well-to-do bankers to begin with.[5] Other studies of conversion in Rome often stress correctly that most converts were poor and hoping to escape poverty.[6] It was easier for the well-to-do Corcos to bury their past while they were showered with honors and material possibilities. Yet, here, too, we must not be precipitous. In the case of other well-to-do Jews, enticements failed, as happened with Anna Del Monte, who was dragged at gunpoint to the *Casa dei Catecumeni* (›House of Converts‹), as were the Ascarelli children, and wooed by telling her she would be given a prince as a husband[7] – in fact, a well-known trope that the converted sister of Anna's in fact low-class (and himself converted) suitor also spouted.[8] We must not be facilely convinced that material benefit was the key to conversionary success, despite Ugo Boncompagni's (Salamone) personal profit.

Conversion could be complicated, as in the case of Flavia, the daughter of Deborah Ascarelli and granddaughter of Ugo (Salamone). Flavia converted by choice, but neither Deborah nor Joseph Ascarelli, Flavia's stepfather, yielded to heavy pressure. Still, Flavia, assisted by her mother, petitioned Flavia's grandfather Ugo for a respectable dowry.[9] In normal cases, where parents and stepparents were lacking means, as were Debroah and her husband, this was accepted practice. But Ugo was resistant, and the matter went to court, even reaching the high court of the Rota, dragging on for over seven years. Could the resistance of Flavia's mother and stepfather, Ascarelli, explain the delay? Or was this the norm with respect to the length of Rota cases, as Poutrin notes?

We broach here a subject Poutrin does not pursue in depth – to be fair, she has otherwise grappled with so many – which is the relationship between *neofiti* and Jews. To wit, we just saw Deborah, despite her rejection of Christianity, petitioning her converted father for the benefit of her, Deborah's, converted daughter. More commonly, because of the myriad laws controlling lending, the Corcos-Boncompagni had to sell debts to Jewish bankers, specifically, as Poutrin shows, the Sessa, of Sicilian origin. Canonically, this should have been forbidden, but it was not. Poutrin explains carefully the whole legal problem of converts and their ability to retain wealth achieved through banking. She also delves into

3 See recently Emily Michelson, Catholic Spectacle and Rome's Jews, Early Modern Conversion and Resistance, Princeton 2022.

4 See Anna Foa, Un vescovo marrano: il processo a Pedro de Aranda, in: Quaderni storici 99 (1998), 533–551.

5 On Jewish bankers in Rome, see Attilio Milano, Il Ghetto di Roma, Roma 1964, chapters 13 and 14.

6 Kenneth Stow, A Tale of Uncertainties. Converts in the Roman Ghetto, in: David Capri (ed.), Shlomo Simonsohn Jubilee Volume. Studies on the History of the Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Period, Tel Aviv 1993, 257–281.

7 Kenneth Stow, Anna and Tranquillo: Catholic Anxiety and Jewish Protest in the Age of Revolutions, New Haven 2016.

8 Katherine Aron-Beller, Jews on Trial: The Papal Inquisition in Modena, 1598–1638, Manchester 2011.

9 On Jews and dowries, see Michael Gasperoni, La misura della dote. Alcune riflessioni sulla storia della famiglia ebraica nello Stato della Chiesa in età moderna, in: Laura Graziani Secchieri (ed.), Vicino al focolare e oltre. Spazi pubblici e privati, fisici e virtuali della donna ebrea in Italia (secc. XV–XX), Florence 2015, 175–216.

the question of the inheritance of children who converted, while their parents remained constant to Judaism, a subject this reviewer himself has investigated, and for which he thanks Poutrin for her further inquiries.[10] But what happened with lower-class converts? To be fair, answering this oh-so-broad a query would have led our author far afield from her essential focus.

Regardless of Poutrin's acumen in assembling sources, their orderly presentation posed enormous challenges. The maddening (to researchers) Italian Jewish habit of naming at least the first-born male after the grandfather makes keeping generations distinct and pinpointing the identities of individuals nearly impossible. Readers will have to pay very close attention. An appendix of genealogical tables (which I discovered only well into my reading) compensates to some degree. Beneficial, nonetheless, would have been a more thorough and schematic introduction to the family in the book's opening pages, going beyond the present short discussion about the Corcos and the family's branches. Besides, however greatly clarifications about identities might have eased the reader's task, they would not have affected her analyses and conclusions.

A side observation, born of my personal research interests, concerns the assimilation into the Roman Jewish community by arrivals from Iberia in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.[11] This question is constantly debated, but in, for example, their adopting the deeply-rooted Italian custom of naming just mentioned, we may see how swiftly Sephardim began integrating just generations after their arrival. This was much as marriages between Sephardim and Italqim, that fundamental marker of social integration, rapidly multiplied.

To return to the book itself, it is clear that fully identifying individuals was daunting. Poutrin brilliantly identifies (the above-named) Deborah Corcos – known as a »poetess«, but about whom otherwise nothing has been unearthed – as the eventual second wife of Giuseppe Ascarelli; it was also a second marriage for her. But who was Giuseppe Ascarelli, whom Poutrin calls a notary and an important rabbi? Notarial texts identify him as a notary; I have records of him drawing up contracts for sales. But he is not included in the collected documents of those crucial Jewish notaries who also took down testimony, known as »The Notary of the City« (Archivio Storico Capitolino, Sezione 3, Notai Ebrei). At least once, he functioned as a *dayyan*, an halakhic judge. But no text identifies him as »Rabbi«. At the most he is a *maskil navon*, »a wise learned person«, a title distinct (and indisputably inferior, despite what has been said elsewhere) from Rabbi.[12] *Maskil navon* is how Ascarelli is identified during his service as *dayyan*, alongside a second judge, also called a *maskil navon*, and a third, who, in contrast, bore the formal title of Rabbi. Indeed, a text from 1611, near the time of his death, refers to Ascarelli only as *eccellente signore*. We are left in a limbo, which is complicated by a final text where Ascarelli is the principal signatory on an Italian document registered with civic officials elaborating the rules for removing the sciatic nerve from the hindquarters of kosher-killed animals, indispensable for the meat to be properly for Jews to consume; he had to be an important figure, and influential. However, this document is dated internally as being issued on February 11, 1619. Yet in court testimony Poutrin brings from 1608, two Christians call Ascarelli rich – another text from 1592 identifies him as a banker, meaning a lender – but on the

10 Kenneth Stow, Neofiti and Their Families, or Perhaps the Good of the State, in: Leo Baeck Yearbook 47,1 (2002), 105–113.

11 On the debate about amalgamation, see Kenneth Stow, Prossimità o distanza: etnicità, sefarditi e assenza di conflitti etnici nella Roma del sedicesimo secolo, in: Rassegna Mensile di Israel 58 (1992), 61–74; and Kenneth Stow, Ethnic Amalgamation, Like it or Not: Inheritance in Early Modern Jewish Rome, in: Jewish History 16 (2002), 107–121. Both cite the relevant literature, including Ariel Toaff, Il Ghetto di Roma nel Cinquecento, conflitti etnici e problemi socio-economici (in Hebrew, with Italian summary), Ramat Gan 1984; also Shimon Schwartzfuchs, Controversie nella Communità di Roma agli inizi del secolo XVI (Scritti in Memoria di Enzo Sereni), Jerusalem 1970.

12 Bonfil's magisterial study of the Italian rabbinate in the 16th century does not include *maskil navon* as a rabbinic title, whereas Serena di Nepi, wrongly, does. See Robert Bonfil, Rabbi and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy, trans. by Jonathon Chipman, London 1993, esp. 182–184 on Giuseppe Ascarelli; Serena di Nepi, Surviving the Ghetto Toward a Social History of the Jewish Community in 16th-Century Rome (Studies in Jewish History and Culture 65), Leiden 2020, chapter 3 on rabbis.

other hand, at about the same time two Jews say he is old, decrepit, bedridden, and poor (Deborah was no longer alive). Adding to the confusion, Poutrin brings unimpeachable evidence of Ascarelli's belongings being parceled out to his heirs in 1614, placing his death about 1613. Surely, the act of 1619 was a reissue, or was it? I have no hard answers; but, note, none of the fine points here change the story significantly. I have brought them in great detail in order to illustrate the obstacles Poutrin faced in compiling her materials.

Still, I would like to address what likely was Giuseppe's much changed status from affluent to poor. Going beyond Poutrin, I propose that the conversionary pressure placed on both Ascarelli and his wife led others – certainly Christians, but perhaps Jews as well – to refrain from placing loans with either of them, eventuating in their penury, yet possibly reinforcing their determination to remain Jews. But this sounds too simple to be true. For did not Elia di Salamone Corcos (see immediately below) remain a major force in the Jewish community, even after his grandfather, also Elia, converted, in 1566, to take on the name Michele Ghislieri, followed by his sons. If anything, we see how generalizing about the fate of converts can be both precipitous and simply wrong.

The sections of the book dealing with the laws of the »offering« of children as converts and with questions of converts' financial rights qualify it as review-worthy in a journal of legal history. The section that will most attract readers of this review, I suspect, is the first chapter, in which the just-named Elia di Salamone won a claim before the Roman Rota, the highest pontifical court. As far as I could see, Poutrin never directly links this chapter to the rest of the book. But this diminishes neither its value nor its usefulness as she explains, which will surely be new for most, the structure and workings of the Rota. But it is her conclusion that is truly valuable. Elia was defending his absence of liability for a wager, made in 1587, with the powerful Cesare Zattera. Regardless of Zattera's arguments, one of which was the trope that all Jews cheat in business, Elia won based on law. In Rome, this is a central question. Universally, Jews were deemed *cives*, citizens – in civil matters. Discrimination flowed from the canons.[13] The question facing the historian is whether the due process and equal treatment of the *cives* Jew – a requirement since the *Sicut iudaeis* of Innocent III in 1190, in whose words: »No Christian shall presume to wound their persons, or kill them […] without the judgment of the authority of the land« – meant truly fair treatment in practice.[14] Here, at least for once, even in the religiously explosive atmosphere for Jews of the Rome of the later 16th century, it did. Poutrin's patience in unraveling this source was great.

Isabelle Poutrin's research carries us in unexpectedly new directions in a topic that many, perhaps, would consider already heavily researched. We are challenged to reexamine the relationship between Rome's Jewish community and its upper-class neophyte deserters – and, especially pertinent for this journal, the relationship between Jews and the courts. This book is both intensely scholarly and extremely stimulating. We are in Poutrin's debt.

■

13 G. B. De Luca, Theatrum veritatis et justitiae …, 19 vols. 1669–77; 12 vols. (Cologne 1689–99), cited by Kenneth Stow, Feeding the Eternal City: Jewish and Christian Butchers in the Roman Ghetto, Cambridge 2024, 64.

14 Solomon Grayzel, The Church and the Jews in the Thirteenth Century, New York 1964 (repr.), 92–94.